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ABSTRACT

A number of the historical and contemporary games of black children reflect an attitude of resistance and assertion on the part of the players. Older game songs, dating from the days of slavery, express a recreative anger against slave masters or a contempt for the theater image of the jolly plantation slave, Jim Crow. Post-Civil War songs and dances defy the degradation of the slave experience and convey a buoyant hope for a better future. The contemporary games of black children, selected from a sample of children in the Buffalo (New York) black community, comment on sexuality, health, looks, and parental influence. Some games teach cause and consequence concepts or emphasize counting and learning the alphabet; others act out nonverbally the awareness of social roles and behavior. All of these games demonstrate the creative energy that black children exert in meeting the oppressive conditions that exist in their lives. (NAI)

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What's in Small Talk?: Revolutionary Communication in Black Children's Games

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"What's in Small Talk?: Revolutionary Communication in Black Children's Games"

Revolutionary communication in the context of African American life styles is resistance and assertion. It is where our people have resisted oppression and asserted their sassiness. These twin components of the African American experience are indicative of revolutionary communication processes in our children games. The intent of revolutionary communication is to create situational change. Asante (Smith) and Rich in Rhetoric of Revolution, a little noticed book, published in 1971 argued that all revolutionary communication is concerned with dramatic situational change. Although the games of African American children may not be as overtly concerned with a dramatic change, the change suggested is most certainly significant.

It is the thesis of this paper that black children games like the more thoroughly discussed spirituals, blues, hollers, and sermons serve a resistance purpose. The whole of black culture, during and after the slave experience, was orchestrated toward the salvation of the people. This is not to evoke wonder; it is rather as should be expected when a people are constantly bombarded with negative stimuli from the oppressor society.

We have chosen several games from historical and contemporary black societies to demonstrate the extent of the resistance and assertion in children games. The contemporary games were selected from a sample of 23 children in the Buffalo black community. Our aim was to select current games and to determine to what extent they reflected resistance and assertion.

Older games were collected from Bessie Jones' Step it Down. She found her games along the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina.

Our analysis stems from the theoretical propositions advanced by Asante in 1970 in his article "A Metatheory for Black Communication." Thus the interaction of frame of mind, structure of code, scope of context, and message delivery constitute a metatheoretical field for analysis. The significance of this field, this system, is that it provides a place for exploring black language and communication. All aspects of black language and life are interwoven in these games. The following examples serve to demonstrate the resistance and assertion.

Where you going buzzard?
Where you going, crow?
I'm going down to new ground
to knock Jim Crow
up to my kneecap
down to my toe

And everytime I jump up
I knock Jim Crow
I knock
I knock Jim Crow
I knock, I knock
I knock Jim Crow

Originating with the blacks along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts this singing game was an attack on the political and commercial caricature which had come into American English. A white actor named Thomas D. Rice had begun to characterize a jolly free plantation slave in the 1820's. (Jones, 1974) Blacks who heard about the characterization from those who had occasion to see it were angered. It was this recreative anger which led them to teach their children to knock Jim Crow. The image of the jolly free plantation slave was inimical to them. The impact of the game was increased as they increased the tempo to knock Jim Crow.

Little Sally Walker
sitting in a saucer
crying and a-weeping
over all she has done

Rise Sally Rise
wipe out your eyes
fly to the east, Sally

Fly to the west, Sally
Fly, to the very one
you love the best.

Oh, shake it to the east
Oh, shake it to the west
Oh, shake it to the very one
you love the best.

Little Sally Walker expresses the optimism almost always present in the black community. Not only is the game an expression of optimism and a command for strength "Rise Sally Rise" but a revolutionary statement for Sally to wipe the tears from her eyes and to fly to the very one she loves the best. Children following the lead of their parents always turned the games into positive statements, even when they started out sad or tragic. Little Sally Walker was not to remain seated, crying and weeping in a saucer, she was to rise and after rising she was to be sassy and shake it to the east and to the west and to the one she loved the best.

Way go, Lily
Way go, Lily
I'm going to rule my ruler
I'm going to rule my ruler
I'm going to rule him
with a hickory.
I'm going to rule him
with a hickory.

This song is usually punctuated by "sometimes." It probably originated during slavery and is rarely heard now except in Charleston and Savannah. Resistance is paramount. One can see the obvious sentiment of wanting to treat the master like the master has treated the slave. This song was sung

in the slave quarters and continued in the segregated ghettos after the war between the states. Such provocative songs and dances kept alive the hope of a better day. In fact, the words "sometimes" and "some day" were used in an ominous way.

Sandy Ree

Way down yonder
Sandy Ree
Where I come from
Sandy Ree
Girls love boys
Sandy Ree
Like a hog loves corn
Sandy Ree

Papa got a shovel
Mama got the hoe
If that ain't farming
I don't know

Dog on the proch
kicking off fleas
Chicken in the yard
scratching up peas

Old brother rabbit
died with a habit
in my garden
eating up the cabbage

If I live
to see next fall
I ain't gonna plant
no cotton at all

Mama in the cotton patch
Picking up cotton
Papa in town
drunk and sloppin'

Well, if I live
and I don't get killed
I'm going back
to Jacksonville
Road is wet
woods is muddy
daddy's so drunk
He can't stand studdy

Down in the bottom
cotton goes rotten
can't get a bale
It's no need of trottin'

Your dog bark
He don't see nothin'
My dog bark
He done see somethin'

One of these days
and it won't be long
You'll look for me here
And I'll be gone.

Again the defiance, the longing, the intention to escape oppression, to change status, to deny the oppressor of labor show through as a most revolutionary posture. To not plant cotton or to run away is tantamount to denying the slave owner the right to decide what to do with his property. But it is the independence of the black soul, defying by every conceivable means the degradation of the slave experience. Buoyancy was inexplicable to the oppressors; it was life to the Africans. These games are old but may be heard in black communities even now.

Contemporary games of black children exemplify a continuation of resistance and assertion with the ever present pedagogical element. Causes and consequences, sexuality, social roles and behavior, mathematics and history are all parts of the song games, jump rope games and clapping games of black children.

While playing these games, black children exercise an inherited oral tradition and simultaneously engage in nonverbal behaviors. Although description of these nonverbal behaviors are not studied in detail, most of the games are accompanied by nonverbal behaviors. The clapping games are particularly nonverbal. They possess elaborate clapping patterns

where children may touch open hands as they move back and forth. All of the games are lyrical and rhythmic. In the clapping games the children always stood either facing each other or side by side with no more than a foot or a foot and a half separating them.

The creativity of these games reflects the improvisational nature of black oral and musical idioms. When not sure of the words the children appear to improvise. One little sister put it this way. "You just make up somethin' that rhymes." There is a generative element in the game dynamic, one can always make up games.

My mother and your mother were sitting in a ditch
My mother called your mother a black son-of-a-bitch
Bring out the children and let them play with sticks
when they get older they learn to play with
Dick was a little boy who played with Tiny Tim
He jumped in the piss-pot to see if he can swim
He swam to the bottom, he swam to the top
when he came up he was in his mother's
cocktail and ginger ale ten cents a glass
If you don't believe me I'll kick your
Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies
This is a true story about your mother and mine.

The creativity of this clapping game is the clever signifying of the so-called "bad words." Blacks have used this technique in "talking bad" to oppressors since coming to Africa. It is an adaptation of the resistance and assertion strategem. You can say what you need to say without being perceived as a threat.

Another clapping game utilizing the strategem of signifying goes:

Johnny had a steamboat
His steamboat had a bell
Johnny went to heaven
His steamboat went to
Hello operator
Give me number nine
If you don't connect me
I'll kick your
Behind the refrigerator

There was a piece of glass
Johnny fell upon it
And broke his little
Ask me no questions
I'll tell you no more lies
Johnny told me about it
the night before he died.

Some of the children were heard singing another song, called "Ronald McDonald."

Ronald McDonald
A big dick
oh its a whopper
A big dick
I want another
A big dick
It's so sweet
A big dick
Light my cherrytree
A big dick
Ronald McDonald
A big dick.

Games such as these are quickly spread throughout the community. They comment on sexuality, health, looks, and parental roles. They are created particularly when children seem to have few other amusements.

To begin with, in their games, black children teach each other cause and consequence. One such indicator is a song-game called Fat amd Skinny which goes:

Fat and Skinny was in the bed
Fat rolled over and Skinny was dead
Fat called the doctor and the doctor said
One more move and we'll all be dead.

This same game is also sung like this:

Fat Mama and Skinny Mama was in the bed
Fat Mama farted and Skinny was dead
Fat mama called the doctor and the doctor said
One more fart, we'll all be dead

Again, the ability of black children to improvise is displayed. Boys and girls sing this game.

Another example is a song-game called Mary, Mary. Although there are implications in the song that a boy is singing it, black girls sing it. It follows:

Mary Mary please don't say no
To the basement we must go
Put your butt against that wall
Here I come busting all
Won't your mother be disgusted
When she find your cherry busted
Won't your father be surprised
To see your belly rise.

This particular game also communicates sexually which is also another element which black children communicate to each other. In their games they express that they are very well aware of sex and sexual organs as well as other parts of their bodies. This clapping game is one such game which concludes

Five by Five
We shut our eyes
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night
Six by Six
He stuck out his dick
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night
Seven by Seven
We went to heaven
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night
Eight by Eight
The doctor was late
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night
Nine by Nine
It was a quarter to 9
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night
Ten by Ten
We took off our clothes and did it again
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night

Boys also have their own song games which girls do not play. One such game is sung:

Ain't your mother pretty
She got meatballs between her titties
She got scrambled eggs between her legs
Soda pop in her cock

Besides communicating cause and consequence concepts and sexuality black children are also aware of social roles and behavior. Such awareness can be seen in this song-game which is acted out nonverbally concurrent to the words of the songs.

When Mary was a baby, a baby, a baby,
When Mary was a baby, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of putting a thumb in her mouth)
When Mary was a girl, a girl, a girl
When Mary was a girl, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of playing jump rope)
When Mary was a teenager, a teenager, a teenager
When Mary was a teenager, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of gossiping on the telephone)
When Mary was a lady, a lady, a lady
When Mary was a lady, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of switching down the street)
When Mary was married, married, married
When Mary was married, she look like this
(sing: "Here comes the bride, Here comes the bride)
When Mary had a baby, a baby, a baby
When Mary had a baby, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of rocking a baby in her arms)
When Mary killed her husband, her husband, her husband
When Mary killed her husband, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of stabbing her husband with a knife)
When Mary killed her baby, her baby, her baby
When Mary killed her baby, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of stabbing her baby)
When Mary killed herself, herself, herself
When Mary killed herself, she look like this
(nonverbal gesture of laying in her tomb)

Another example is a short song-game about a prostitute in which girls put their hands on their hips and swing them as they walk.

Strut Miss Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie
Strut Miss Lizzie all night long

Sometimes the name is changed by substituting it with their own.

In some of the games, younger black children teach themselves how to count and how to recite the alphabet in their own original and fun way which appears to be more fun than the traditional games they learn in school. One such game is "Miss Sue."

Miss Sue (2 claps)
Miss Sue (2 claps)
Miss Sue from Alabama
She got to A, B, C, D, E, F, G
She got to H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P
She got to Smoooooth touch
She got to Smoooooth touch
She got to FREEZE
(When FREEZE is shouted, everyone freezes in their place in any position for a few seconds)

"Cinderella" is a jump rope game which teaches counting at least to twenty-five.

Cinderella think she's cute
She always wear her bathing suit
If you count to 25
You will get another try

(The child in the middle of the other two who are turning the rope jumps until she stops the rope by missing a jump).

"Teddy Bear" is another jump rope game in which black children count. In this one, they count up to the number of times they can jump without stopping the rope.

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear
Turn all around
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear
Touch the ground
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear
Shoe your shoes
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear
Be excused (repeated until the child jumps out)
(While the rope is in motion, without stopping the rope. After she does, the other children continue to sing:)

Come back in (repeated until the child jumps back in while the rope is in motion).
Then it continues:
Go upstairs
Say your prayers
Lord have mercy on my soul
How many biscuits have I stole
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ... (child jumps until she makes a mistake)

This game also has an indicator of the black religious-cultural experience by singing a popular expression used by black folk - "Lord have mercy."

A contemporary version of "Mary Mack" goes:

Oh Mary Mack, Mack, Mack
All dressed in Black, Black, Black
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons
All down her back, back, back

She paid 15 cents, cents, cents
To see the elephants, elephants, elephants
Jump over the fence, fence, fence

He jumped so high, high, high
To reach the sky, sky, sky
And he never came back, back, back
To the 4th of July, ly, ly

The "fourth of July" seems to express the knowledge of the national holiday. There is an objectism bond of the black experience which is found in "Mary Mack." For example:

She went upstairs, stairs, stairs
to make her bed, bed, bed
She made a mistake, stake, stake
and bumped her head, head, head
On a piece of cornbread, bread, bread

In the last line, cornbread, a favorite food of blacks is mentioned.

In this next song game, nothing visible, in terms of content, expresses black culture. But in the second last line the children do something that is almost equivalent to scatting - a verbal play of sounds used famously by black musicians.

Hey Cathy, somebody's calling your name
Hey Cathy, somebody's playin' your game
Hey Cathy, somebody want you on the telephone

If that's my mama I ain't home
Sitting at the table drinking Black Label
Chi chi chi wa wa, chi chi chi wa wa boom
Ah shucks - one more time (then whole game is repeated)

Another song-game in which the same thing is done is "Ronald McDonald" although there are many more song-games which exhibit varieties of this technique of play on word sounds.

Ronald McDonald had some french fries
Ronald McDonald had some french fries
Ooohh chi chi wa wa french fries
I got a nickel french fries

Ronald McDonald had some milk shake
Ronald McDonald had some milk shake
Ooohh chi chi wa wa milk shake
I got a nickel french fries

(do the same thing with hamburger and pop)

Black children also seem to express an awareness of the conflict that can occur between adults.

Your mother and my mother live across the street
1414 Broadway Street
Every night they have a fight
And this is what they say:
Kiss my aka backa, my soda cracker
my jelly belly (the rest of this game is not recorded because the children forgot the rest of the words at the time this was written).

Although all of these games communicate something about black children's awareness of life and society, some of them are created just for fun. Two such games are "Fudge, Fudge" and "Miss Susie" (jump rope games) but kids also like to just sing them. They go as follows:

Fudge, fudge call the judge
(any name's) havin' a baby
Wrap it up in toilet paper
Send it down the elevator
Boy? Girl? twins? triplets?
(Child stops jumping on the one he/she chose).

Miss Susie
Miss Susie had a baby
She named him Tiny Tim
She put him in a bathtub
To see if he could swim

He drunk up all the water
He ate up all the soap
He tried to eat the bathtub
But it wouldn't go down his throat

Miss Susie called the doctor
The doctor called the nurse
The nurse called the lady with the alligator purse

One more is titled "Peace, Black Power" and goes:

I went down town to see James Brown
He gave me a nickle to buy me a pickle
the pickle was sour, he gave me a flower
the flower was dead, and this is what he said
Peace, Black Power - your mama need a shower
Don't laugh, Don't laugh - your daddy need a bath

Again the objectism from the black community makes a resounding appearance in this word game with "James Brown" and "Black Power".

Resistance and assertion are the twin elements present in black children games historically and currently. What these games demonstrate is the creative energies of our people in meeting oppressive conditions. These are more than survival games; they are victory statements. No one could presume to be master of the person who could throw dirt in your eyes and make you think it is visine. Thus, the small talk the games black children play, and the objectism in their language, constitute structure, frame, and context for revolutionary struggle at a certain level of existence.